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ABSTRACT

To study the effects of behaving inconsistently with a central attitude, subjects (N=77) filled out a "Contemporary Social Issues Questionnaire," and then completed a sex-role or non-sex-role logic problem. It was hypothesized that subjects who score high on a feminism scale and who fail to solve a sex-role problem, thus demonstrating sexist thinking, will be motivated to adopt feminist behavior more than subjects who are either lower in feminism or who do not fail such a problem. Since the attitude is central, attitude bolstering rather than change in the direction of the behavior should be the preferred mode of inconsistency reduction for such subjects. Bolstering, in the form of positive affirmative action decisions, was generally demonstrated by subjects who failed the sex-role problem, an effect more pronounced for those highest in feminism. No such effects on affirmative action decisions were observed for subjects who did not fail the sex-role problem. Results support the view that threats to one's self-image caused by one's own counter-attitudinal actions lead to attempts to reestablish those threatened values. Conditions are identified under which bolstering, rather than attitude change in the direction of the behavior, should be expected. (Author/NRB)

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Attitude Bolstering Following Self-induced Value Discrepancy

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One of the most researched issues in social psychology over the last two decades has been the effects of engaging in counter attitudinal, dissonance inducing behavior on subsequent attitudes. Dissonance reduction in the form of attitude change has been shown to occur when the counter attitudinal behavior is adopted under conditions of low external justification, when there is a sense of personal responsibility in adotping the behavior, and when actual or potential aversive consequences follow from the behavior.

While most of the dissonance research has focused on attitude change in the direction of the counter attitudinal behavior, there is no reason to assume that this is the primary mode of dissonance reduction. A second form of dissonance reduction involves a bolstering of the initial attitude. When the original attitude is especially strong and central, involving a large degree of prior commitment, dissonance reduction following counter attitudinal behavior is more likely to involve a bolstering of the initial attitude system. This bolstering will serve to reestablish the validity of the actor's initial set of central, self-relevant beliefs. In contrast, when the initial attitude is not highly central, change in the counter attitudinal direction rather than bolstering should be the preferred mode of dissonance reduction.

In line with this attitude bolstering argument, Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956) nonexperimentally studied a group of religious fantatics who had predicted the end of the world. When the predicted doomsday came and passed, members did not weaken their belief system or commitment to the group. Rather they attempted to bolster their initial beliefs by adopting behavior consistent with those beliefs -- by proselytizing new members.

Experimentally, Steele (1975) threatened subjects by labeling them as apathetic and unconcerned about the welfare of others. These subjects responded positively to a subsequent request for help in a community project. Similarly, Dutton & Lake (1973) told a group of white students who valued racial equality that their physiological responses to slides indicated an underlying prejudice. Such threats to a central value led to an increase in donations to a black panhandler.

Both of these experimental studies involved an external agent who labelled the subject with a counter attitudinal position. In neither case was there a freely chosen behavior as would be necessary for dissonance arousal. Consistent with dissonance theory, the present study involved a threat to a central attitude that stemed from the subject's own freely chosen and naturally occurring behavior. In addition, the present study tested the proposition that the conditions necessary for such attitude bolstering involve the strength of the subject's initial attitudes and the situation surrounding the adoption of the discrepant behavior. That is, only subjects who have strong and central initial attitudes should use attitude bolstering as a mode of inconsistency reduction.

One value that finds widespread support on college campuses is feminism. Yet, behavior of even the most ardent feminist appears sexist at times. The authors recently came upon a logic problem that few college students are able to solve and which clearly indicates sex role stereotypic thinking. The problem is as follows:

> "A father and his son are out driving. They are involved in an accident. The father is killed and the son is in critical condition. The son is rushed to the hospital and prepared for the operation. The doctor comes in, sees the patient, and exclaims, 'I can't operate, it's my son!"

Subjects are asked to provide the most logical explanation for the set of circumstances provided. Gorkin (Note 1) found that only 18% of his subjects identified the mother as the doctor in this situation. This occurred despite the fact that virtually all subjects indicated that feminism was very important in their system of values.

Consistent with the prior reasoning, one should predict that for subjects who highly value a feminist position, the inconsistency aroused by failure to solve this problem should be reduced by attitude bolstering as demonstrated by adopting behavior that indicates a non-sexist position. On the other hand, subjects who fail the sex role problem, but who are not strongly committed to a feminist position, should resolve any inconsistencies between attitudes and behavior by changing attitudes in the direction of the discrepant behavior, i.e., they should become less feminist.

Method

The subjects for the study were 77 undergraduates who were recruited from introductory psychology courses. Each subject was randomly assigned to an experimental condition. All subjects initially filled out a "Contemporary Social Issues Questionnaire" which included attitudes toward feminism, e.g., "sons in a family should be given more encouragement to go to college than daughters." Subjects in the experimental conditions were then presented with a logic problem to solve. They were given either the sex role problem in which failure to identify the doctor as the boy's mother indicated traditional sex-typed thinking, or a non sex-role problem (a dot connecting problem). This latter group ensured that any observed effects were not simply due to a failure experience. After subjects attempted one or the other problem, the experimenter showed

them the correct answer. The experimenter did not discuss the answer or mention how other subjects had performed. Control subjects were given neither problem. They simply filled out the initial questionnaire before doing the attitude measure.

At this point, the experimenter introduced a separate study of how people process information to arrive at legal decisions. This involved an affirmative action lawsuit in which a woman claimed that she had been denied a university faculty position because of her sex. The specific facts of the case and the qualifications of this woman and of the man hired were presented. Subjects were asked the following: 1) to reach a verdict ranging from acquitting the university to finding the university guilty with severe penalties, 2) to rate how justified was the decision to hire the man, and 3) to rate 5 questions assessing general attitudes toward hiring women and minorities (which were combined into 1 item). These measures constituted the major dependent variables in the study.

To reduce the possibility of demand factors, the following precautions were undertaken: 1) embedding the 5 feminist questions in a 20 item scale so that the feminist aspects of the study were not so salient, 2) taking great care to separate the various phases of the study, (i.e., the questionnaire, the logic problem and the affirmative action decision). The experimenter indicated that she knew little about the legal case study. She told the subjects to put their answers in a stamped envelope addressed to another part of the state. She was not in the room when subjects filled out the affirmative action booklet.

Results

A multivariate analysis of variance was performed on the 3 dependent measures derived from the lawsuit. The effects of feminism (treated as a

continuous variable) and problem condition (sex role, dot connecting, no problem) on these measures were examined. The effect of problem condition was highly significant. The univariate tests revealed that, for each item, subjects who failed the sex role problem were more positive toward affirmative action. Unexpectedly, the multivariate analysis revealed no effect for initial feminism score.

It was predicted that bolstering by sex role problem subjects (in the form of support for affirmative action) would be shown primarily by subjects high in feminism. This predicted interaction between initial feminism score and problem condition was marginally significant ($p < .11$). However, post hoc tests lent greater support to our hypothesis. For example, the Multiple R for the dependent measures regressed on feminism scores for the sex role problem subjects was .71. The corresponding R's for the dot-connecting and control subjects were .29 and .21. Fisher exact tests showed that the Multiple R for the sex role problem differed significantly from both of these groups. Taken together, these results supported the hypothesis that the effects of failing the sex role problem were greatest for the high feminism subjects.

Evidence for the interaction between feminism and problem condition was obtained despite the fact that few of the subjects were actually "low" on the feminism scale. The range of scores was 5 (highest feminism) to 30. The mean for all subjects was 13.6, a quite feminist position. No strongly non-feminist positions were represented. Thus, even subjects in the lower third of feminist scores may have shown attitude bolstering following failure on the sex role problem. If the entire range of feminist positions had been represented, one would have expected to find a main effect for initial feminism on affirmative action decisions. Moreover, had

there been more non-feminists in the sample, perhaps an even stronger indication of the interaction between feminism and problem condition would have resulted.

Discussion

While primacy, salience, and impression management interpretations of these data cannot be eliminated, the results are quite consistent with a dissonance interpretation. In addition to violating, and thereby threatening, self-relevant expectancies, failing the sex role logic problem also involved the other characteristics necessary for dissonance arousal. A high degree of choice and responsibility was involved. The sexist behavior is clearly self-generated. Furthermore, failing the sex role problem involved the potential for aversive consequences by recognizing the pervasiveness of sexist thinking in oneself.

While the present study was not meant to address the self-perception vs. dissonance controversy, there are some observations to be made. Subjects failed to adopt behavior in line with the nonfeminist inference that might have been drawn from their behavior. Rather, they behaved in a manner inconsistent with a self-perception theory that proposes that inferences drawn from behavior will lead to subsequent behavior consistent with those inferences.

The goal for future research is to determine: a) the long term effects on highly committed subjects of engaging in counter-attitudinal behavior, and b) a demonstration of the interactive effect between initial attitude and the situation surrounding the adoption of the discrepant behavior in which both high and low commitment groups change in opposing directions (i.e., high subjects move in the direction of the initial attitude, while low subjects move in the direction of the counter-attitudinal behavior).

Reference Notes

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